Teaching autonomy

Railton, Diane; Watson, Paul

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ARTICLE

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'Reading groups' and the development of autonomous learning practices

DIANE RAILTON & PAUL WATSON *University of Teesside, UK*

ABSTRACT A key factor in the transition to university is the enculturation of new students into both the discipline they are studying and effective study practices. Most significantly, students, whatever their chosen discipline, must learn to become autonomous learners. Too often this process is either left to chance or seen as a natural attribute of the higher education learning system rather than a particular skill that must be learnt and can be taught. In this article we discuss one particular approach to designing 'structured autonomy' into a first year core media studies module. We argue that the notion of autonomy needs to be considered as a central component of learning, teaching and assessment strategies and, moreover, that an integrated approach towards these factors has the additional benefit of contributing towards a more holistic first year experience for students.

KEYWORDS: *autonomy, enculturation, first year experience, peer support, skills, transition*

Introduction

> . . . the biggest problem for many first year students is their mindset that all the material they need to complete the unit successfully will be provided in lectures, tutorials and lecture notes.
>
> (respondent cited in Waters, 2003: 299)

The distinction between deep learning and surface learning has formed the axis for much educational thinking in recent times (see, for example, Atherton, 1999; Biggs, 1999; Johnston, 1998; Newble and Cannon, 1995; Ramsden, 1992; Rhem, 1995; Rust, 2002). This approach distinguishes between different *styles* of student learning, but is predicated on the assumption that students arrive at university *already knowing* that their role is to learn, not merely to be taught. Often our experience tells us that the very opposite holds true, with many students simply transferring expectations of

education derived from their experience of the school system into the university context. Indeed, one of the major factors facing teachers and students in higher education today is precisely this process of transition from one model of education to another, for students, a stage which Ballinger refers to as a 'potentially disorientating period at the start of their degree studies' (Ballinger, 2003: 99, see also Parker, 2003; Smith, 2003, 2004; Yorke, 2003). What we often end up doing is expecting students to adapt their practices to fit ours as if by osmosis: we expect students to 'speak the same language' as us and intuitively understand the adjustments in their learning practice that higher education demands.

Perhaps the key difference in working practice that we want students to understand, and the one that is often the most difficult to communicate to them, is that they will be expected to function as autonomous learners from the outset of their time at university. Implicit in this, of course, is that we expect students to have the skills to effectively manage a significant amount of independent study time with little or no explicit or structured direction from us. The maxim 'go and read' is, to some extent, emblematic of the mismatch between our expectations and student skills. It is, perhaps, the clearest indication of the fact that students and teachers are two communities divided by a common language. For instance, while on the one hand, we may know precisely what we mean when we advise students to 'go and read', on the other hand such proclamations are in themselves practically useless to new students unless they are accompanied by further explication such as, what to read, how to read it, and what to do with it. These are precisely the kind of specific academic skills that students are unlikely to have had to utilize in previous modes of education and, contrary to what we seem to hope, do not inherently possess or 'naturally' develop.

In what follows we argue that as part of the process of enculturing students into higher education, a process of bridging the 'gaps or gulfs between school and university' (Clerehan, 2003: 72), there needs to be far greater clarity in the ways we communicate our expectations, and, moreover, increased attention must be directed towards *teaching* the *skill* of autonomous learning. To this end, we shall discuss the way in which some of these issues have been addressed by making some relatively minor modifications to the learning, teaching and assessment strategy of the level one, core module Studying Media Studies within a BA (Hons) Media Studies programme. More specifically, these modifications turn upon the implementation of a system of 'reading groups' which act to link learning and assessment within the module to broader issues of enculturation, peer support, and the transition to appropriate academic learning practices. Reading groups are in essence small, independent student study groups that

serve to provide a forum for discussion and a focus for individual students' autonomous learning.

Approaches to learning: the gap between students and tutors

Reading groups developed out of our experience of, and frustration with, teaching first year students in seminar groups. The Media Studies core programme had previously been overwhelmingly based on the 'traditional' model of a lecture-seminar delivery pattern. Seminars were designed to promote discussion of issues raised in the lectures and addressed in core readings. Students were directed to prepare for these sessions by reading a set text or selecting appropriate material from a reading list. The seminar sessions themselves were, in principle, geared around small-group discussion of questions provided by the tutor which were designed to prompt students to relate issues addressed in the reading to those raised in the delivery. In practice, however, this rarely happened. On the contrary, students seemed reluctant to take part in discussion and often diverted any debate back towards the tutor by requesting further explanation of either the material delivered in the lecture or encountered in the reading. By the same token, tutors often felt the pressure to 'fill' the gaps in student understanding and acquiesced to their demands. As a result of this, seminar time was often spent delivering what was, in effect, 'a second lecture' at the expense of student participation. Therefore, neither the intellectual nor the skills-based outcomes of seminars were met with any consistency, and the social component of seminar teaching was undermined. In short, a 'culture of dependency' became established which worked to prevent autonomous and effective student learning. In other words, what students seemed to lack was what Rawson refers to as an 'awareness of self as learner' (Rawson, 2000: 235). In such a learning environment, the tutor was positioned at the core of the student learning process, the owner and disseminator of knowledge. By implication, the student was positioned as peripheral to their own learning, the recipient of pre-digested knowledge.

There are two principal factors which, on reflection, it was possible to identify as contributing to this situation. These factors were related to the working practices of both students and tutors and the differing expectations each held of the function and purpose of seminars. In the first instance, students rarely prepared in a way that enabled them to participate in the seminar process as we understood it and designed it. This is not to say that they did not 'do the reading', but rather that their understanding of what 'doing the reading' entailed was substantially different to ours. We

presumed that, before attending the seminar, students would read and reread texts until they had acquired some level of understanding of the issues and key arguments. The students, by contrast, often understood the term 'reading' as *simply* reading the words on the page, paying at best cursory attention to the ideas expressed in those words. Moreover, where students had attempted to move beyond this literal understanding of 'reading', they nevertheless tended to focus on identifying gaps in their knowledge rather than engaging with the ideas in the text. Furthermore, these putative gaps in knowledge were, strictly speaking, rarely gaps in disciplinary knowledge, that is the content of the text, but related more specifically to its form, to the language and vocabulary in which the content was expressed. As such, the problem was not that students had not prepared for seminars per se, but that they had prepared for seminars as *they* understood them rather than the way *we* understood them. Students, therefore, came to seminars prepared to seek help from the tutor, but not prepared to contribute intellectually. In other words, they came to be taught, not to learn, where learning is understood to mean a dynamic process in which the student is actively involved. It is no accident, of course, that student conceptions of both their own and the teacher's role and responsibilities in the seminar process should so closely mimic that of the school class, given that our expectations of the purpose and process of preparation largely remained unspoken.

Secondly, we had expected that students, even if they had not actively prepared for the session, would be interested in the subject they were studying to the extent that they would have strong opinions and would welcome the chance to express and debate them with others. We anticipated that one of our key roles as seminar tutors would be to facilitate discussion and ensure that less confident members of the group were afforded the opportunity to speak. Indeed, many of the teaching techniques deployed in this context were predicated on this principle, that is, enabling voices to be heard. In practice, however, this model of student learning was problematic. Although many students were willing to engage in discussion, or at least conversation, with the tutor, they were generally reluctant to discuss things with each other. In plenary sessions, comments were addressed solely to the tutor, and in small group work the main aim of each group seemed to be to catch and hold the tutor's attention. While on the one hand, therefore, there was an appearance of learning inasmuch as students did participate in the processes, on the other hand it was precisely that, merely an *appearance*. There was a tendency for students to attempt to align their responses to the notion of a 'right answer' rather than exploring a range of possible responses with each other. There were two aspects at work here: students' conception of the 'right answer' was determined by

what they perceived the tutor 'wanted to hear'; and the validity of responses was measured by the tutor's reaction to them on a crude scale of right/wrong. Moreover, there was slippage from the already problematic notion of a straightforwardly right/wrong answer to an even more problematic evaluative good/bad judgement of the student as an individual person. While this, in itself, has potentially damaging consequences for students' confidence and self-esteem (see Boud, 1995), in relation to learning, this situation can be understood as one where, in Yorke's terms, 'performance goals' have become 'elevated above learning goals' (Yorke, 2003: 489). Students wanted to 'do well', yet 'doing well' was not, in their minds, directly linked with learning. It became clear that students did not see discussion with their peers as a *learning process* but rather a way of demonstrating to the tutor not only that they were 'participating', or even that they 'knew' the 'right' answer, but that they were a good person. In practice students approached seminar work in the same way that they approached assessed work. In positioning the tutor as the proprietor of knowledge, every interaction with the tutor inevitably became construed by students as an examination situation where their work, and by implication they themselves, would be judged.

Rather than taking the opportunity, therefore, to 'try out' their ideas with others, students tended to 'play safe' insofar as they restricted their range of responses to those which were felt likely to be judged as correct. One negative implication of this logic for student learning is the development of *strategic concealment*: a process in which students direct their talents and energies towards hiding their limitations rather than improving their learning practices. In the end, the seminar process was reduced to something like a game of second-guessing what the tutor wanted as opposed to an active learning relationship. Students did not see each other as a valuable learning resource, or, for that matter, even involved in the learning relationship. This model of learning, of course, is completely at odds with how *we* understand the sociality of the learning process. That is to say, social dimensions are fundamental to the learning process, and especially crucial to modes of complex learning characteristic of higher education. Moreover, the role of the teacher/tutor is not necessarily privileged above that of other people. It is, despite having specific functions, simply one amongst many.

The main point here is the differing conceptions of knowledge and learning adopted by academics and students. Learning *proper* is, for us, an ongoing, incremental process that takes place within a network of complex social relationships. One implication of this view is that knowledge itself is not fixed and permanent, but negotiated and permeable. Moreover, knowledge is constantly being constructed and reconstructed through the

interplay of ideas and experiences in complex social and institutional situations. Learning, therefore, is not simply about finding knowledge, but involves contributing to its creation. By way of contrast, however, for the student, knowledge was conceived as something that was, and could be, owned by individuals. For them, therefore, the goal of learning was to acquire knowledge from those who were perceived as already in possession of it. And, once again following the logic of the school class, it was tutors who were positioned as owners of knowledge – a situation compounded by their position as graders and assessors of student work. Students did not understand either themselves or their fellow students as possessors of valid knowledge, knowledge which contributes to the learning process. Taking this, together with student perceptions of appropriate preparation, it was clear that students expected that their role in the learning process, even in higher education, was to be taught, not to learn, to be given knowledge, not participate in its creation.

In order for learning on the module to become more effective it was important to work with rather than against the ways students perceived learning and participated in it. That is to say, it was not useful to continue to act on the assumption that students had the same understanding as we did of the function of seminars. Nor would it be profitable merely to tell students in more detail of the value of seminar discussion and its importance to their progress and hope that their understanding would eventually align itself with ours. Given the students' desire to be provided with the 'right answer', this would continue to produce a *performance of learning* rather than learning itself – a negotiation in which both the quality and the quantity of students' participation would be directly proportionate to its affirmation as 'right' by the tutor. In other words, it is precisely this desire to be taught that renders it essential for students to *find* the relevance of group discussion for themselves rather than have the justification imposed upon them. It is only by doing this that students will be able to reassess both their role as learners and the stake they hold in the learning process. By the same token, we, as tutors, have had to reassess our role vis-a-vis student learning and the way we enact it within the context of the prevailing expectations held by students of what that role entailed in relation to their learning.

Embedding autonomy: a case study

The following section discusses the practical measures that were implemented on the module Studying Media Studies precisely in order to counteract the performance of learning (see Figure 1). It is worth noting at this point that this was a new year-long module designed to replace two

Previous practices	Studying media studies
Teaching strategies	
• 1 hour lecture	• 2 hour lecture / workshop
• Lectures address disciplinary knowledge	• Lectures address disciplinary knowledge *and* learning skills
• 1 hour tutor-managed seminars	• 1 hour student-managed reading groups
• Individual tutorials (during general office hours)	• Group tutorials (during timetabled reading group slot) • Individual tutorials (during general office hours)
Assessment strategy	
• Book review and essay (*IMM*) • Group presentation and essay (*C&C*)	• Glossary, article report and essay
Learning support	
• Handouts in lectures	• Lecture slides and other materials available through Blackboard
• Discussion questions provided during seminars	• Discussion questions provided in advance of reading groups via Blackboard • Group discussion space via Blackboard

Figure 1 **Changes in teaching, learning and assessment practices**

single-semester modules, 'Introduction to Mass Media' and 'Culture and Consumption'. Both of these modules were delivered through a one-hour weekly lecture, one-hour seminar sessions and individual tutorials. Of course, a key benefit of replacing two short modules with one longer one was that the assessment strategy could be rationalized and made more coherent. Moreover, assessment could be specifically linked to the learning and teaching practices we were introducing on the new module. The linking of learning tasks with assessment in this way is crucial insofar as there is now a significant amount of research that suggests, 'assessment is the most significant prompt for learning' (Boud, 1995: 37) and the principle way of 'getting students to spend time on task' (Gibbs, 1999: 45). Indeed, the success of the learning strategy, and thus reading groups themselves, is dependent on students actually participating in them in meaningful and constructive ways. The assessment strategy for the module, therefore, is designed to be both incremental, in the sense that the knowledge and skills required to complete each element develop out of previous elements, and is linked to reading group activities in ways that are clearly visible to students. It is comprised of three separate assignments: a 'Glossary of Key Words' in which students demonstrate *comprehension* of key concepts; an 'Article Report' which requires students to *apply* a key concept in a delimited context; and an 'Essay' in which students *use and critique* a range of key concepts.

In practical terms, as module tutors the first action we took in implementing this revised learning and teaching strategy was to physically remove ourselves from the seminar room. This was important as the regular presence of a tutor allowed a pattern of behaviour to become established

whereby students sought advice, and thus avoided discussion, or sought confirmation that merely performing learning was acceptable. By taking the tutor out of the situation, students had to take far greater responsibility for their own learning. Absenting ourselves from the immediate context of the classroom, however, was only one part of the strategy for arresting dependence and addressing the development of student autonomy. Indeed, simply 'not being there', although crucial, would facilitate neither meaningful group discussion nor any of the critical skills of academic reading, analysis and critique which such discussions are predicated on. Likewise, it would not be reasonable to expect students to realize the importance of these skills without input from tutors. Therefore, we designed a range of interrelated learning activities to encourage students to adequately prepare for their group discussions and develop their skills-base.

First, at the very beginning of the module students were allocated to a reading group – a group of approximately six students who would work together for the entire academic year. Each group had a timetabled space in which to meet for one hour each week. In other words, what had previously been a venue in which a single seminar group met was now a slot in which three or four reading groups would meet simultaneously. Tutors would not be involved in any regular or predetermined way in these sessions, but students were informed both that tutors would 'drop in' from time to time and that appointments were always available during this time for group tutorials. Groups were encouraged to also meet outside of their timetabled slot and to sit and work together during the weekly lecture in order to promote the development of group identity. In addition, each group was provided with private 'group space' on Blackboard (the university's virtual learning environment), which enabled them to access a group discussion board as well as send emails and swap files between themselves. In these ways, then, while tutors were not actively running group sessions, the seminar time remained structured, channels for continued discussion had been facilitated, and tutor support was provided.

Second, partly in response to the students' desire for both the delivery of content and further explication of it, and partly as a way of interacting with reading groups but not in the context of a seminar, the weekly lecture slot was extended from one hour to two to allow more flexible ways of teaching. This move not only made possible the inclusion of group workshop activities within the lecture programme, but also provided space in which students could be introduced to aspects of the learning and teaching literature to inform and contextualize their learning practices. Indeed, lecture/workshops were built into the teaching programme which addressed such topics as deep and surface learning, the role and use of feedback in student learning, and the reading of academic articles. The

lecture programme, therefore, had now been developed in such a way that the teaching of learning skills was embedded alongside the teaching of disciplinary knowledge. In addition, tutors attended the initial reading group sessions to work with students to both reinforce the notion of learning practice introduced in the lectures and suggest ways in which such ideas might inform their group work. In other words, not only was it made explicit to students that a significant value was placed on the skills of learning rather than just the content of learning, but a mode of group working between students and tutors was established that avoided the culture of dependency that had previously characterized the seminar experience.

Third, a range of learning materials was provided for students to both structure individual students' independent study time and facilitate group work. A series of set weekly readings formed the centre of these materials, supported by worksheets designed to give students both an intellectual framework for their reading and the opportunity to develop the critical skills needed to both use and critique the ideas they encounter in this reading. Indeed, students are explicitly required to demonstrate these skills in subsequent assessment events. And, if we accept Rust's proposition that 'students are likely to take a strategic approach to their studies, and in general only seriously engage with learning tasks if they are going to be assessed, with marks attached' (Rust, 2002: 153), then integrating assessment with the *activity* of learning helps to validate this activity as strategic and thus a worthwhile way for students to spend their time.

None of this is to suggest that the use of reading groups is unproblematic, nor that they are free from limitations. Nor, for that matter, is it to suggest that they are the only way, or even necessarily the best way, of addressing student autonomy. For the method one chooses to teach autonomy, if it is to be successful, must be tailored to the specificities of the disciplinary context. Moreover, success itself is difficult to measure and, like all teaching methods, reading groups do not work equally well for all students. Indeed, removing the tutor from the immediate context of the seminar discussion can initially be unsettling for staff as well as students. Most obviously, it disrupts one of the key mechanisms we tend to use for monitoring student attendance and participation. One of the things we found most difficult in this process was 'not knowing' if any constructive work was taking place, or even if any work was taking place at all. However, in resisting the urge to constantly be seen to be 'checking up' on the groups, we developed other ways of monitoring aspects of what was happening on the module. For example, the use of Blackboard allowed us to track the use of learning materials and levels of participation in virtual discussions. By the same token, we adapted our own practices within the lecture delivery

to accommodate more interaction between ourselves and the students which enabled us to get a weekly snapshot of how groups were working and give us the chance to intervene where necessary.

Conclusions

The range of measures discussed in this article was implemented in order to disturb the 'mindset that all the material . . . [that students] need to complete the unit successfully will be provided in lectures, tutorials and lecture notes' (respondent cited in Waters, 2003: 299). We wanted our students to learn that, as Barnett argues, 'the passive assimilation of knowledge has no place in higher education' (Barnett, 1990: 154) and, moreover, that active learning is essential to achievement insofar as it forms part of the criteria by which their work is assessed and graded. The assessment for the module was incremental both in terms of the skills and knowledge it demanded and the degree of autonomy required in its execution. Of equal importance, this shift in expectations was explicitly reflected in the marking criteria and process of grading the work. As such, we want to stress that in order to destabilize the way of thinking that is focused around teachers teaching and students being taught – a model from which learning becomes entirely evacuated – the benefits of autonomous learning have to be explicitly demonstrated to students through our own practices. In other words, the role and skills of autonomy were not allowed to remain submerged beneath a performance of learning. There were two distinct but related considerations involved in bringing them to the surface. Firstly, we could not continue to simply tell students, however precisely we did so, that they *should* become autonomous learners. Rather we *enabled* them through modifying the emphasis of the module's learning, teaching and assessment strategy to acquire and develop the skills needed to learn successfully and autonomously. Secondly, the development of these skills was rewarded. Indeed, by both enabling and persuading students to relinquish their habits of learned dependence, which we should remember are hard habits to break, the goal of autonomous learning became meaningful and desirable.

What we have discussed here, of course, is simply one way of addressing the problematic nature of autonomous learning in higher education. The issues raised, however, have wider implications than this single instance. In order to move beyond what Yorke has termed 'learned dependence' (Yorke, 2003: 489) it is essential to establish a culture of independent study at the first possible opportunity. Moreover, establishing such a culture has to be an active process. Students need to learn to become autonomous learners and they need to be made aware that levels of

achievement at university are directly related to the development of the skills of autonomous learning. This observation, of course, has implications for the execution of our role as teachers in higher education. The relationship between learning practices and levels of academic achievement must not only be coherently articulated, but also clearly *visible* to students in the ways we assess and grade their work. Most obviously, if we expect our students to be able to work autonomously – and if we continue to cite autonomy as perhaps the key marker of 'graduateness' – then it ought to follow that its significance is evident in our own practices. As a priority, here, we would argue that autonomous learning should be explicitly conceived as a skill that can be acquired in the same way as other academic skills and that practices which encourage the development of this skill must be embedded within the learning, teaching and assessment strategy of our degree programmes. This means, above all, that the skills required to become an effective autonomous learner must be *taught* in the same way that we teach other generic and discipline-specific skills. To leave the development of autonomy in our students to chance seems to us foolhardy: autonomous learning is as much a skill as learning to drive – it must be taught, it requires practice, and it is assessed against specific criteria. Unless they are *taught* how to take the wheel for themselves, learner students, like learner drivers, may be at risk. And there are very good reasons why we do not allow learner drivers out on the road by themselves.

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Biographical note

DIANE RAILTON and PAUL WATSON are both Senior Lecturers in Media Studies at the University of Teesside. Their research interests within the learning and teaching field are focused on the interrelationship of theoretical models and the day-to-day practice of teaching in higher education.

Address: Media Academic Section, School of Arts and Media, University of Teesside, Middlesbrough TS1 3BA, UK. [email: d.railton@tees.ac.uk; p.watson@tees.ac.uk]